DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 582 PS 015 206

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TITLE Maternal Attitudes toward Mother-Child Separation: Working and Nonworking Mothers of School-Age Children.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, April 25-28, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Demography; *Elementary School Students; *Employed Women; Homemakers; *Mothers; One Parent Family; *Parent Attitudes; Preschool Children; Primary Education; Questionnaires; *Separation Anxiety; Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

Exploring possible similarities and differences between mothers who work outside the home and mothers who do not, this study provides a preliminary investigation of maternal reactions to mother-child separation when children have reached school age. A total of 41 women working outside the home and 48 mothers staying at home responded to a 10-question survey about their stress at separation from their children. Participants were mothers of prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first-grade children attending a New York City Public Elementary School. Mothers working outside the home described themselves as more career-oriented and more anxious over separation from their children than did mothers not working outside the home. However, in general, certain salient relationships among the variables described the attitudes of both groups. One conclusion, consistent with previous research on maternal employment, is that maternal separation attitudes are determined by multiple factors and cannot be explained by working status alone. (A list of survey questions is appended.) (Author/RH)

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Maternal Attitudes Toward Mother-Child Separation: Working and Nonworking Mothers of School-Age Children

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Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Toronto, Ontario, April 25, 1985

Running head: MATERNAL ATTITUDES TOWARD MOTHER-CHILD SEPARATION

PS 015206

Abstract

In this study, 41 working and 48 nonworking mothers responded to a ten question survey about their perceived stress at mother-child separation. Although working mothers described themselves as more career oriented and more anxious over separation from their children, in general, certain salient relationships among the variables described the attitudes of both groups of mothers. One conclusion, consistent with previous research on maternal employment, is that maternal separation attitudes are multiply determined and cannot be explained by working status alone.

KEY WORDS: Maternal employment, Separation anxiety, Mother-child interaction

Maternal Attitudes Toward Mother-Child Separation: Working and Nonworking Mothers of School-Age Children

The child's first entrance into school is considered to be of critical importance in the psychological development of the mother-child relationship (Bloom-Feshbach, Bloom-Feshbach, & Gaughran, 1980). During this process, the mother undergoes considerable changes in her development. Her identity as the primary influence in her child's life is now challenged by the school experience, teachers, and peer groups. For many children and parents, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten are the first mandatory exposures to prolonged separation from each other. This period can be a difficult coping experience for both children and their mothers, with separation concerns at their height. The literature has focused on the reactions of children to separation from parents but little is known about this psychological process in mothers.

Hock (1978) employed an unstructured interview technique in her study on separation attitudes of mothers of infants. Her interviews focused on five aspects of separation stress. The first factor was the mothers' level of career interest, which determined the importance of a career in the mothers' lifestyle and in her value system. Mothers with high career interest did not feel that their families were necessarily more important than their career goals. The second aspect was the mothers' interpretation of her child's discontent, which measured the amount of self-reference to the child's negative moods and behavior in non-separation related situations. This category provides us with more global information about the mother's

perceived relationship with her child. The next three sections dealt with specific separation experiences: The mothers' perception of her child's discontent upon separation, the mothers' feelings when leaving her child, and her attitude toward nonmaternal care. Hock believed the mothers' perceptions of her child's reactions at separation to be a critical measure influencing her opinions about exclusive care and leaving her child. If a mother feels that only she can adequately care for her child it would be expected that her stress at separation would be high, and she would perceive distress in her child when separating.

The present study institutes the same assessment categories as Hock (1978) but in a structured questionnaire format. Hock (1978) found that working mothers of 3 and 12 month old infants, when compared to nonworking mothers, perceived less infant distress at separation and were less anxious about separation and nonmaternal care of their children. Assessment of separation stress in mothers of older children may, however, be tapping new and different information. For example, infants typically begin to show signs of distress at separation at about six months of age (Lamb, 1982). Consequently, the perceptions of the mothers interviewed by Hock was not largely based on objective behavior or actual expressions by the infants at separation. In contrast, mothers' reactions to separation from school-age children should be jointly influenced by both their children's specific responses to separation and maternal characteristics influencing the interpretation of these responses.

With the increase of mothers entering the workforce, the factor of maternal employment has gained importance in the study of the separation process. Literature reviews on this topic suggest that the effect of employment status on the psychological development of the child is quite complex (e.g., Etaugh, 1974; Hoffman, 1974; Trimberger & Maclean, 1984). Issues such as the nature of employment, perceptions and attitudes about motherhood, the family structure, and satisfaction with the maternal role, have been found to be of greater significance than the variable of work status alone. Other variables such as communication patterns between mother and child, household responsibilities, the sex of the child, and non-maternal supervision impact on the child's feelings about having a working mother.

But what is the effect of employment status on the mother? Full-time employment would necessarily alter the amount of separation time between mother and child regardless of school hours which are externally fixed. Therefore, working and nonworking mothers might be experiencing different worries and feelings. This study is a preliminary investigation of maternal reactions to mother-child separation when children have reached school-age. The possible similarities and differences between working and nonworking mothers will be explored.

METHOD

Subjects

Mothers of pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade children in a New York City Public Elementary School were invited to participate in this study. Questionnaires were distributed to children by the teachers at each of these three grade-levels. Mothers were asked to return completed questionnaires in a sealed envelope to the teacher. Of the 218 questionnaires distributed to a total of 7 teachers, 89 questionaires were returned resulting in a 40% response rate. The total sample consisted of 41 working mothers and 48 nonworking mothers. The criterion for the category of working mother was employment for a minimum of 20 hours/week for at least one full year. The two groups of mothers were matched on sex of the child and whether this was the first child attending school.

Previous researchers have documented the relationship of maternal work status to educational level, marital status, race, income, and sex of child (Cohen, 1978; Woods, 1972). It has been argued that to match mothers on all demographics would result in the loss of relevant and salient information about the influential factors in maternal employment choices and would preclude a full understanding of the typical mother in a metropolitan area (Weinraub and Wolf, 1983). The demographic profiles of working and nonworking samples are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

The results of analyses on the effects of these demographic variables suggested that these factors did not differentially determine maternal responding in our samples. For example, when working and nonworking mothers were matched on either marital status or race the analyses yielded patterns of correlation coefficients similar to those reported for unmatched samples (see Results). Moreover, when an analysis of variance was performed on the main effects of income, education, race, sex of child, and marital status on the five study variables in the questionnaire, only the main effect of income on career orientation emerged as significant; and working and nonworking mothers did not significantly differ on income level ($t = -.03$, $p > .05$). Thus, it appears that the working and nonworking mothers in this study do not significantly differ on demographic variables.

Instrument and Procedure

All mothers completed a ten question survey developed by the investigators (see Table 2). Enclosed with the survey was an informed consent form, which was to be signed by the mother and returned with the completed questionnaire. An explanation of the study and instructions were included in the informed consent form. On the first page of the survey demographic data was collected. The questionnaire was based on an interview schedule developed by Hock (1978) consisting of five aspects of separation stress: Career Orientation, Mothers' Interpretation of Child's Discontent, Mothers' Separation Stress, and Mothers' Attitude Toward Nonmaternal Care, but the order of the variables was changed.

Insert Table 2 about here.

In this study, Career Orientation was presented as the last category instead of the first in an attempt to minimize the possible implications of work status on the mothers' responses. The questionnaire provided ten statements (two for each study variable) and the mother checked how closely the statement describes her feelings (see Table 2 for examples of the items). The mean of the scores for the two statments was computed to provide a score on that variable from 1-4 with the same direction of scaling as Hock.

RESULTS

When the average scores of working and nonworking mothers on each of the five separation issues were compared, working mothers described themselves as more career oriented, $t=3.01$, $p<.01$ and more anxious over separation from their children $t=2.03$, $p<.05$ (see Table 3). While higher career orientation in employed mothers would be expected and is consistent with Hock's previous findings, unlike the employed mothers of our school-age group, the working mothers of infants were not found to experience more anxiety. Moreover, unlike the mothers' of infants, maternal employment in our sample did not distinguish mothers on levels of distress when leaving their children, or apprehensiveness over nonmaternal care.

Insert Table 3 about here.

In general, the pattern of relationships among the variables similarly describes the separation attitudes of working and nonworking mothers (see Table 4). For all mothers, concern over nonmaternal care was significantly related to both maternal stress at separation from the child and career orientation. That is, mothers who reported themselves as highly anxious about nonmaternal care reported experiencing a greater degree of distress when leaving their child as well as lessened career orientation. This latter relationship suggests that the circumstance of maternal employment by itself does not lead to a more positive attitude toward substitute child-care.

Insert Table 4 about here.

Mothers reporting higher levels of maternal separation stress also reported that their children experienced higher levels of stress at separation ($r=.19$, $p<.05$ for the combined sample). Thus, regardless of work status, mothers experience increased difficulty separating from their children when they believe their child shows increased separation distress as well as when they have negative attitudes toward nonmaternal care. Finally, to what extent a mother reported that her child experiences stress at separation, is significantly related to the degree to which she believes that her child's discontent is typically a reaction to her own behavior, $r=.25$, $p<.01$ for the combined sample (although

separate correlations suggest that this relationship is stronger for the nonworking sample, r_s=-.36 and -.15 for nonworking and working mothers respectively).

Interestingly, the relationship between self-attribution of the child's discontent under non-separation conditions, and level of career orientation resulted in significantly different correlations for working and nonworking mothers. The nonworking mother who is more likely to make self-attributions regarding her child's discontent is also more likely to report less career orientation, while for working mothers a significant, slightly positive relationship emerged.

DISCUSSION

In this study, the separation experiences of mothers when their first child enters school was explored. In general, both working and nonworking mothers share common worries and concerns. In contrast to Hock's (1978) findings, we found that for all mothers anxiety over nonmaternal care is positively related to distress over leaving the child. In the sample of mothers of infants, working mothers experienced less anxiety over nonmaternal care. This confirms previous findings that substitute care is a critical issue for working mothers (Woods, 1972; Cohen, 1982) and suggests that this may also be true for nonworking mothers. As their children get older and the role of the non-maternal caregiver as a socializing agent increases, mothers may be more concerned over appropriate substitute care regardless of their working status.

For all mothers in this study, concern over nonmaternal care was positively related to maternal stress at separation and negatively related to career orientation. Therefore, the circumstance of maternal employment by itself is not related to a more positive attitude toward child care, and indeed, anxiety over leaving one's child under nonmaternal care may contribute to a lower career orientation. The comfort in pursuing a career is complex and appears to be tied to anxiety over leaving one's child. In addition, mothers who work out of necessity rather than because of career aspirations or nonworking mothers who do not express a desire for a career, may be less comfortable about the consequences of separation or may feel substitute care is less adequate. This relationship is similar in working mothers but not for nonworking mothers of infants (Hock, 1978). Nonworking mothers of school-age children with high career orientation may be fulfilling their needs through different avenues and may spend less non-school hours with their children than mothers with low career orientation. As a result, they may be experiencing the same difficulties as working mothers in finding satisfactory forms of child-care

The finding that the more discontent a child displays at separation the greater distress the mother will experience when leaving her child, may be explained by Field's proposal that parental behaviors cue and reinforce the child's responses which in turn then influence subsequent parental behaviors (Field et al., 1984). The school-age child, unlike the infant, has more efficient means of communicating his/her feelings and consequently, maternal reactions to separation may be more

explicitly tied to the specific separation behaviors and expressions of the child. The increasing influence of specific child behaviors on maternal reactions when compared to individual patterns of maternal responses to separation need not, however, be mutually exclusive. For example, in the present study, mothers who perceived their child's discontent in non-separation situations as a self-reference were inclined to perceive greater distress on the part of the child upon separation. The degree to which individual differences in maternal characteristics such as locus of control, self-esteem, and dependency influences their evaluation of their child's behavior is fertile ground for future investigation.

In general, mothers share similar patterns of separation stress but there is evidence that working and nonworking mothers do differ on certain dimensions. Unlike mothers of infants, working mothers of school-age children were found to be more anxious over separation than the nonworking sample, while both groups perceived similar levels of distress by the child at separation and experienced similar degrees of apprehension over child-care. These results are in contrast to those of Hock's (1978), but maternal attitudes and feelings about motherhood and working outside the home can be expected to change over time and circumstance (Hock, Gnezda, & McBride, 1984) and therefore, different findings with mothers of school-age children is not surprising. One of the differences between our study and Hock's is the different demographic characteristics of the samples, specifically the greater proportion of single mothers in the working sample. Single mothers have been found to work longer

hours and are more likely to place their children in child-care settings for longer periods of time (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). In general, single mothers face increased pressures and less time to handle responsibilities in the home, including the care of their children. Whatever the degree to which marital status versus the child's age is responsible for differences in the results of our study and Hock's (1978) findings, the data suggest that during the early school years maternal employment may place a mother at increased risk for anxiety under separation related events.

The major difference between separation experiences of working and nonworking mothers is that nonworking mothers with low career orientation tended to self-reference the child's discontent more often, with the opposite finding for the working sample. Mothers with high career orientation who chose not to work at this time may experience less guilt, believing that they have sufficiently sacrificed for their child, or they may be motivated by a sense of duty to their child gaining emotional satisfaction from this loyalty (Yarrow, Scott, DeLeeuw, & Heinig, 1962).

It is also interesting to note that the sex of the child was not an influential factor in the separation stress experienced by mothers. Researchers have found sons and daughters to react differently to separation from their mothers, with males often demonstrating increased vulnerability (Field et al., 1984; Tennes & Lampl, 1964; Dits & Cambier, 1966) but we found no evidence of differential maternal perceptions of the child's distress at separation based on sex. This finding suggests that maternal attitudes toward separation may not play a dominating role in determining the reactions of boys and girls to separation.

In conclusion, there appears to be more similarities than differences between working and nonworking mothers in the separation process. There is reason to believe that working outside of the home does have some signficicant adverse consequences for the mother's experience of stress at separation such as increased anxiety over substitute care, but in general, factors other than work status are more influential in her perceived stress. The issues of substitute care and level of career interest are of considerable importance. There is no doubt that employment status is a complex variable and its effect on both children and their mothers is still open to debate. It does appear that the experience of mothers of school-age children substantially differs from that of mothers of infants. There are a variety of possible explanations for this. Mothers of school-age children have developed a relationship with their child over years rather than months, they react to a more diverse constellation of child behaviors and expressions, and regardless of work status attending school is a forced separation for every mother and child. By better understanding maternal separation experiences we can gain insight into the sources of stress for mothers that would be factors in the psychological development of children.

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Table 1

Demographic Statistics for Working and Nonworking Mothers

	Working(%)	Nonworking(%)
MATERNAL AGE		
Under 25	10%	9%
26-30	27	34
31-35	41	38
36-40	17	15
41-45	2	4
46-50	2	0
MARITAL STATUS		
Married	67	91
Unmarried	33	9
RACE		
White	49	73
Non-white	51	27
INCOME		
<$8999	13	13
<$9-$13,999	13	7
$14-$19,999	13	23
$20-$24,999	21	18
>$25,000	41	40
EDUCATION		
Did not graduate H.S.	10	20
H.S. Graduate	29	36
Some vocational school	22	24

College degree or advanced degree	39	20
CHILD'S AGE		
4.5 or younger	22	19
5-5.5 years	19	40
6-6.5 years	49	30
7-7.5 years	8	8
8 or more years	3	2
PARITY		
Oldest or only child	37	45
Middle child	15	21
Youngest child	48	34

Table 2

Survey Questions

Variable	
I Mothers' interpretation of childs' feelings:	
	a) When your child is unhappy, cries, or has a temper tantrum, you feel that your child's behavior is not usually a reaction to something you said or did.
	b) When your child is upset or angry you usually feel that your child's behavior is a reaction to something you did or said.
II Child's reaction to mother at separation:	
	c) When you leave your child he/she is upset at separation because he/she misses you.
	d) When you leave your child he/she is sometimes upset at separation from you, but not on a regular basis and this is usually because of the new experiences and changes your child is experiencing.
III Mothers' stress at separation from child:	
	e) You dread being separated from your child and you constantly worry when he/she is away.
	f) You feel fine about being away from your child. Sometimes you worry about his/her well-being but for the most part you don't feel worried or stressed about it.
IV Concern over nonmaternal care:	
	g) You generally feel no apprehension about someone caring for your child.
	h) You feel anxious and concerned over child care by someone else and prefer to care for your child exclusively when this is possible.
V Career Orientation:	
	i) I feel that other aspects of my life are more demanding than my career at this point in time.
	j) I see my career as a necessary part of my life that is gratifying and fulfilling.

Each variable (labeled I-V) was defined by responses to the two statements underneath it. The mean of these two statements comprised the variable score. Mothers responded to each of the 10 statements by checking either: always, usually, frequently, occasionally, seldom, rarely, or never, with always yielding a score of one and never a score of seven for items a, c, e, g, i and always yielding a score of seven and never a score of one for items b, d, f, h, j.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for the Five Separation Variables for Working and Nonworking Mothers

	Variable	Working Mothers[a] M	Working Mothers[a] SD	Nonworking Mothers[b] M	Nonworking Mothers[b] SD	t	p
I	Mothers' interpretation of child's feelings	3.99	1.02	4.04	.76	-.28	.777
II	Child's reaction to mother at separation	3.90	.96	4.06	1.00	-.76	.447
III	Mothers' stress at separation from child	3.78	1.50	4.45	1.59	-2.03	.045*
IV	Concern over nonmaternal care	4.60	1.30	4.23	1.72	1.12	.264
V	Career Orientation	4.17	1.44	3.19	1.61	3.01	.003*

[a] n sample size=41

[b] n sample size=48

*$p<.05$. **$p<.01$.

Table 4

Correlation Coefficients for the Five Study Variables: Total, Working, and Nonworking Samples

	Variable	II Reactsep	III Matsep	IV Care	V Career	
I	Mothers' interpretation of child's feelings (Childfeel)	-.25**	-.09	.08	-.08	Total
		-.15	-.04	.06	.18	Working
		-.36**	-.17	-.11	-.33**	Nonworking
II	Child's reaction to mother at separation (Reactsep)		.19*	-.12	.00	Total
			.18	-.09	-.13	Working
			.17	-.12	.15	Nonworking
III	Mothers' stress at separation from child (Matsep)			-.66**	.14	Total
				-.58*	.20	Working
				-.71**	.23	Nonworking
IV	Concern over nonmaternal care (Care)				-.38**	Total
					-.48**	Working
					-.42	Nonworking

Note. There were 41 women in the working sample and 48 women in the nonworking sample, totalling 89 participants.

*$p<.05$. **$p<.01$.